

## Teaching for social justice education: the intersection between identity, critical agency, and social justice education

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*In line with national policy requirements, educators are increasingly addressing forms of social justice education by focusing on classroom pedagogies and educational practices to combat different forms of oppression such as racism and sexism. As all educators have a role to play in dismantling oppression and generating a vision for a more socially just future, teacher education has the responsibility to capacitate pre-service teachers to work in areas of social justice education. It is, however, difficult to conceptualise programmes for social justice education without considering the interconnection between various social identities and how such identities can feed into critical agency and education for social justice. Working with the assumption that white women teachers must be part of the solution to bring about social change in South African education, we used in-depth interviewing to explore pre-service teachers' emerging identities as teachers, and how these identities are connected to notions of critical agency and a stance towards social justice.*

**Keywords:** agency; anti-oppressive education; identity; social justice education; teacher education; white women pre-service teachers

### Introduction

In 1995 the *White Paper on Education and Training* envisaged that “[n]ew education and training policies to address the legacies of under-development and inequitable development and provide learning opportunities for all will be based principally on the constitutional guarantees of equal educational rights for all persons and non-discrimination, and their formulation and implementation must also scrupulously observe all other constitutional guarantees and protections which apply to education” (Department of Education, 1995: Chapter 3, Section 16). Central to all education acts and policies that followed 1995 is the call for teachers to advocate for social justice, human rights and inclusivity. Increasingly, teachers and researchers are addressing forms of social justice education by focusing on classroom pedagogies and educational practices that seek to deal with and combat different forms of oppression such as racism, sexism and heterosexism (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007; Francis & Hemson, 2007; Francis, Hemson, Mphambukeli & Quin, 2003; Hemson, Moletsane & Muthukrishna, 2001; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2002; Richardson, 2004). If national policy requires that all teachers are *socially just teachers*, the problem for teacher education of ‘unexamined areas of the self’ is general, and not limited only to those who teach about oppression (Francis & Hemson, 2007).

Our paper seeks to explore pre-service teachers’ emerging identities as teachers and how this identity is connected to notions of critical agency and a stance towards social justice. We address two critical questions pertaining to pre-service teachers’ conceptions as “agents of

change” and how their perceptions as change agents frame their teacher identities and understanding of teaching for social justice. Before proceeding, it is necessary to clarify the ways in which we understand and use identity, agency and social justice education.

## **Conceptual framework**

### **Identity**

Research on teacher identity and particularly pre-service teacher biographies is seen as relevant to teacher educators in order to better understand and conceptualise the support that student teachers need (Beijaard, Meijer & Verloop, 2004). Identity has become one of the unifying frameworks of intellectual debate and discussion:

Everybody, it seems, has something to say about it: sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, psychologists, geographers, historians, and philosophers ... At every turn we encounter discourses about identity; and not only identity. The talk is also about change: the emergence of new identities, the resurgence of old ones, and the transformation of existing ones (Jenkins, 1996:7).

South Africa is a society undergoing rapid social change and accordingly there has been resurgence in issues of identity reflecting this change. Singh (1997) argues that, since the abolition of apartheid, South Africans have had the historic opportunity of transcending and reshaping new identities and fashioning a new set of understanding who they are and what they consider to be of fundamental value to themselves.

While some contemporary writers use identity as a basic datum that simply “is”, others use it to refer to ways in which people define themselves. Newman (1997:20) offers a useful way of thinking about how individuals make sense of “who they are”. Identity, on the one hand, is our most essential and personal characteristic and, on the other hand, it consists of our membership in social groups (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, etc.), the traits we show, and the traits others ascribe to us. For Newman (1997), identity has become a medium for defining the self as a unique individual and thinking of oneself as a member of a social group. How one’s identity is experienced will be mediated by social group or category memberships, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, age, class, language, sexual orientation, physical ability and language. Our identity locates us in the social world, thoroughly affecting everything we do, feel, say and think in our lives.

Identity construction is not passive and, as Giddens (1991:52) points out, it is not something that is just given as a result of the continuities of the individual’s action system; rather, identity is “something that has been routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual”. Deaux and Ethier (1998:305) explain that identity is an on-going, negotiated process. Not only do identities shift over time in a long-term sense, but people often also make choices among various identities as they move from one circumstance to another. Within this understanding of identity there are two clear implications: firstly, that a person may have multiple identities, and secondly, identities are shared with others who have the same attributes. Thinking of oneself as a unique individual and thinking of oneself as a group member are both parts of the self. How a teacher’s professional identity is constructed is subsequently linked to the interconnections between personal identity, social identity, context and the roles teachers play in schools.

### **Agency**

Bhasker (1979:46) writes about the active subject who conducts his or her life in varying

degrees of submission or resistance to the possibilities offered by society which “provides necessary conditions for intentional human action”. Bhaskar suggests an active concept of the subject, actively participating in shaping the course of a person’s life in the process of ongoing choice of behavioural options in the face of social demands. Teachers have a role to play in dismantling oppression and generating a vision for a more socially just future (Adams *et al.*, 2007). Agency is a crucial aspect of teacher identity, which translates that teachers have to be active in the process of professional development (Coldron & Smith, 1999). In using the term *agency*, we are not suggesting that teachers always exercise such deliberate self-conscious choices. We use the term with our commitment to an understanding of the dynamic and dialectical nature of the interaction between individual and social context, and the active role of the individual in the process of identity construction and teaching for social justice. Social contexts can either enable or hinder the degree of agency that teachers have. Giddens (1991: 175) argues that human agents “never passively accept external conditions of action, but more or less continuously reflect upon them and reconstitute them in the light of their particular circumstances”. Thus, agency is “action-orientated; it is critical; it is the way that teachers use power, influence, and science to make decisions that effect positive social change” in schools (Moore, 2007:591). We are keen to explore the ways pre-service teachers can exercise agency in working for social justice.

### Social justice education and anti-oppressive education

We understand social justice education as a process and goal that allow for the full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice education:

envisions a society in which individuals are both self determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others). Social justice involves social actors who have a sense of their own agency as well as a sense of responsibility towards and with others, their society and the broader world in which we live (Adams *et al.*, 2007:1-2).

Teachers are thrust into a position in which they must prepare children and communities for participation in an anti-oppressive society. As William Ayers (1998:1) reminds one, teaching for social justice is teaching that arouses students, engages them in a quest to identify obstacles to their full humanity, to their freedom, and then to drive, to move against those obstacles. What Ayers suggests is that teachers can change the context they reside in. There is a widespread misconception, however, that only students of colour, or so-called disadvantaged students, should be involved in social justice education (Nieto, 2004:352). We think differently on this and work with the assumption that white pre-service teachers need to be part of the solution to bringing about social change in South African education.

In summary, our study is concerned with white women pre-service teacher identities and how this intersects with agency and their stance on education for social justice. More specifically, though, our study is a thick description of (1) how white women pre-service teachers perceive their roles as agents of change; (2) how their perceptions of change agents inform the construction of their professional identity; and (3) the relationship between their social identities as pre-service teachers and their understanding of teaching for social justice. We have drawn on the concepts of identity, agency and social justice education to create a framework that will guide us in understanding the experiences of white women pre-service teachers working in the area of social justice education. In presenting this conceptual frame-

work it is not our intention to bring the different bits and pieces together in a “grand theory”, but rather to provide us with a lens through which to examine white women pre-service teachers’ emerging identities as teachers and how this identity is connected to notions of critical agency and a stance towards social justice.

### Research strategy

The critical questions that drive our study are: (a) How do white women pre-service teachers perceive themselves as agents of change? and (b) How do these perceptions as change agents frame their teacher identities and their understanding of teaching for social justice? More specifically, we attempted to understand how this group understood their roles as teachers of social justice education.

### Participants

We used purposive sampling and three criteria were used in the selection of our participants. Firstly, all eight participants were fourth-year BEd students in the Faculty of Education at the University of the Free State. Although seen as an on-going process of negotiation and mediation, we regard the professional identity formation and development of pre-service teachers as individual maturity processes that start during training for the profession (Brott & Kaijs, 2001). In our attempt to establish an understanding of how emerging teacher identities interconnect with critical agency and a stance towards social justice education, we considered the exploration of emerging identities informed, formed and re-informed by several years of professional training and practical teaching experience as important. Working with pre-service teachers in their final year of training enabled us to illuminate their experiences as student teachers working in social justice education.

Secondly, all the participants were *women* and thirdly, they were all *white*. The majority of students enrolled for teacher education at the University of the Free State are white women. Both these attributes, however, are significant when working in the area of social justice education. It was cautiously assumed that the emerging identities of white women student teachers are informed by their interpretation and re-interpretation of experiences (albeit often unconsciously) of gender oppression and white privilege. As Mark Perry (2000:11) asks:

Who am I, who are we, these white teachers who choose to teach students of colour? Are our responsibilities any different from those of other teachers? What does it mean when we are the only white faces in the classroom? How does this impact on our work with colleagues who are teachers and administrators of colour?

We understand that to talk about race and racial categories, is to use terms and habits of thought inherited from the very race science that was used to justify oppression and marginalisation (Erasmus, 2001). Some may argue that to continue to use these categories and terms is to continue that oppression. We respect this argument. Yet it is difficult to talk about what is essentially a flawed and problematic social construct without using language that in itself is problematic (Tatum, 1997). In this study, we view and use race as a social construct and not as indicator of absolute, pure strains of genetic material or physical characteristics. Also, while we will make reference to racial categories such as ‘White’ and ‘Black’, it should not lend legitimacy or credibility to the many popular cultural stereotypes and caricatures that often accompany these descriptors. By using White, it affords us an opportunity to engage a select group of students to establish how they make sense of and how they communicate about identity, agency and social justice, noting and reflecting on the possibility that our use of the

terms and the ways of thinking that accompany them, may influence our research methodology and analysis (Francis, 2006).

### Data sources

It was our desire to encourage intensive interviews where the participants were able to ‘dig deep’ and communicate their understanding of how they see and understand their roles as agents of change and as teachers of social justice. To facilitate this, we used a qualitative approach, because it is well-suited to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study. For data collection we used in-depth interviewing.

At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1991). In-depth interviewing assumes that meanings, understandings, and interpretations cannot be standardised and can therefore not be obtained with a formal, fixed choice questionnaire (Denzin, 1989). During the eight in-depth interviews of approximately 40 minutes each, open-ended questions were used to ensure a conversational dialogue between the researchers and participants. The conversational style of the interview process was further enhanced by the fact that both researchers and participants are part of the same Faculty of Education. All the interviews were conducted in Afrikaans by the second author. The data were then translated and transcribed, again by the second author, so that the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpretation was minimal.

We sought and gained permission from the participants whose responses we report. In order to protect the identity of the individuals involved, all names used in this article are pseudonyms.

### Data analysis

In analysing the in-depth interviews and the content of the data sets, the purpose was to expand, refine, develop and illuminate a theoretical understanding of the emerging identities of white women pre-service teachers, and how these identities intersect with agency and a stance for social justice education. The analysis involved a cross-case analysis for the purpose of theorising about the experiences drawn from the in-depth interviews. We were reliant on Merriam’s (1998) within- and cross-case analysis.

We first considered the responses of individual participants to learn as much as possible about how each set of data responded to our critical questions. Working with the complex configurations of identity, agency and a stance towards social justice within each data set helped us to not only identify themes relating to these notions, but also to build a descriptive framework that was extended to our cross-case analysis. With the help of a cross-case analysis, abstractions in the form of general patterns were built across the data sets (Merriam, 1998:195). The general patterns were refined into meaningful associations to provide an explanation of the interconnection between the emerging professional identities of white women pre-service teachers, their critical agency, and their understanding of teaching for social justice.

While the interviews with the pre-service teachers provided rich data, our research and methodological approach brought with it limitations and challenges that need to be mentioned. The interviews were conducted during the participants’ practical teaching and we found that they tended to relate their examples to their immediate experience. We do not think that this is necessarily a limitation, but perhaps it should be noted. For example, Anna, who was not enjoying her practical teaching, related most of her ideas to problems with discipline. Secondly, the students had little experience of racially diverse learner groups. This is because of the schools’ composition — English classes are predominantly black and Afrikaans classes predominantly white.

## Findings

Our findings in this study are organised around three themes, each with related sub-themes that highlight the interconnection between the emerging identity of white women pre-service teachers and their activism as agents of change for social justice education.

### Identity

#### *Conceptions as agents of change*

All the participants perceived themselves as agents of change and their perception seems to coincide with a perception that the school is responsible for bringing about social change. Apart from Anna, who related her conception to didactical concerns such as her willingness to change her way of teaching and *“not like the old teachers who are no longer prepared to change”*, all the other participants linked their conception with the notion of equality.

For Susan social change is the school’s responsibility, *“especially if you think about the history of our country ... the teachers and schools are in the perfect role to teach learners that things are not right ...”* As a change agent it is important for her that *“as a teacher I have to push away my own pre-conceived ideas about race, or gender, of jocks versus geeks ... in my classroom it is about treating everybody equal”*. In terms of change she argues that *“the whole stigma that rugby and sport are more important than academic work and culture must really be addressed”*.

Although Rita regards social change as the responsibility of the school, she is concerned with the possibility of *“stepping on somebody’s toes”*. She feels that *“if we want things in society to change, then start with the children”*; however, *“it can cause conflict between the household and the school and then I feel you must not do it”*. Rita frames her conception of herself as a change agent within the context of an education system informed by various principles. In this regard, she argues that *“we have been taught in the new principles ... you can instil the principle of equality in your class, you can create such a classroom environment”*. One change that she would like to bring about is a classroom atmosphere where *“I would like them to feel safe, and they must feel one is as good as I ... there must be no distinction in class”*.

Christa links the reason for the inclusion of Life Orientation with the school’s responsibility to bring about social change: *“Included in the curriculum that the learners are taught are things like human rights, social relationships. The school must give these types of things to the learners; the school must bring about change”*. However, she feels that this responsibility must not be limited to Life Orientation only. As a change agent she argues that it will be easier to identify oppressed learners if she works with them on a daily basis. In terms of change, she feels that *“everybody must get equal opportunities, fair opportunities”*.

In terms of the school’s responsibility for social change, Willemien feels that *“we have been given this opportunity and I think it will be wrong not to live up to this opportunity”*. For her the notion of a change agent has to do with the calling of a teacher: *“I have been called to the teaching profession to make a difference, and so I have the responsibility to make a difference”*. Change is for her all about helping learners *“that have misconceptions about themselves ... to show them that they can fulfil their full potential”*.

#### *Consciousness of their whiteness*

During the interviews it became clear that the participants had not consciously thought about their whiteness having an influence on the way they perceived themselves as teachers, or as change agents. Although various perceptions regarding the influence of their whiteness came

to the fore, all of them indicated that their roles as white teachers were different from those of their black counterparts.

For Sandra, who has taught both white and black learners during her practical teaching, being white plays no role, as *“the way I teach remains the same”*. As a white teacher she foresees no problem working with black learners, *“as there was [when working with black learners] no difference ... they had a black Biology teacher and I was the student teacher; there was no major difference because of our race”*. However, Sandra does indicate that *“as a white teacher it will be easier to identify with white learners and it will be easier for them to identify with me ... black learners will identify with a black teacher”*. On a personal level she does not feel she is privileged because of her whiteness: *“... we are all the same”*; however, she acknowledges that her peers at university *“didn’t have the same opportunities as I did because their parents couldn’t afford it, because they were not privileged”*.

Christa *“does not take her skin colour seriously”*, and she has no idea if her being white will have an influence on the way she will teach. Although she indicated that *“black children like to be taught by white teachers, I don’t know if they think they are better trained than black teachers, but I don’t see myself ... better than another teacher”*, she doesn’t want to teach at a black school. She is scared of teaching at a black school because of *“the standards [lower than in a white school], the environment ... and because it is high school ... there are black men who are in matric and are much older; they might be dangerous”*. She feels that white teachers are in a difficult position as *“we see things differently as black teachers ... I don’t think black teachers are so aimed at bringing about change as us ...”*, because *“they have already gotten what they wanted”*. When asked whether she feels she is privileged as a white person, she answered, *“yes, definitely, although some days it doesn’t feel that way, some days I feel that they are really discriminating against whites ... but I see myself as privileged”*.

Esmé also refers to the perception that *“many times people accept that white people are better trained ... but it is not that I feel that white teachers are better than black teachers ... I think we are often labelled that we are better trained”*. She feels that *“it is more acceptable when black teachers bring about change, it is regarded as normal as they have specifically undergone so many more changes than us. You have to justify more your actions as a white teacher than a black teacher”*. She does not see herself as more privileged because of her whiteness; in fact she is annoyed with such a perception and asks questions such as: *“How much time do they need for affirmative action? How much more time do they need to see us all as equal?”*

In contrast to Sandra, who is scared of working with black learners, Esmé does not mind working with either white or black learners. However, it will not bother her to work with only black learners, as it *“is more satisfying for a teacher to work with learners who are more grateful that there is actually somebody who wants to teach them ... while many white schools, especially in rich white schools the learners have an attitude of ‘my father pays your salary’ ... white learners tend more to take you for granted”*. In a similar way, Anna also indicated that black learners are more appreciative of what is done for them, while white learners tend to be more snobbish.

Nadia does not *“like to teach white children, it is very irritating, they have such an attitude ... they have an idea of ‘I am better than you’*. In terms of being a white teacher, she feels *“to teach any other racial group will be difficult ... I think there will be issues”*; however, *“it [being white] plays a role but I prefer not to allow it to play a big role”*. In terms of her role as a white teacher, as opposed to that of a black colleague, Nadia thinks *“we have all an equal role to play ... depending on the environment, if it is predominantly a black school ... you will*

*need the help of your colleagues of that race, culture ... you will make mistakes because of ignorance*". Being white did open a few doors for her, but *"I grew up very poor, I very seldom got something for free, you worked for what you wanted to get"*. Nadia is also of the contention that *"at this stage we whites feel we are clinging to the rear wheel ... for life and death"*.

Susan, who has worked with both white and black learners, indicated that although she has never thought about the influence of her whiteness on the way she perceives herself as a teacher, *"I have never experienced that I am treated differently because I am white"*. However, as a white teacher she argues that *"if I have a black class in front of me and I tell them something that is to their advantage, they see it differently than if it were said by my black colleague ... when I stand in front of a white class it will not have the same effect as my black colleague"*. Initially Susan said that she *"will not say I am more privileged because I am white"*. However, after thinking about the possibility of white privilege and deliberating the latter, she concluded: *"Apartheid made that whites were better cared for. Yes, I think I was privileged"*. She also feels that *"I prefer working with black learners ... not specifically black learners ... I personally feel it is my calling rather to work with disadvantaged learners than with a lot of rich peoples' kids"*.

#### *Gender consciousness*

Anna, Rita and Willemien linked their identities as woman teachers to traditional and stereotypical beliefs: For Anna, *"women must be more like a mother for the children at the school"*, and in similar fashion, Rita indicated that *"a woman is softer, like a mother, the nurturer and this has an impact on how I see myself as a teacher"*. Willemien sees herself *"as a nurturer and a helper and I have been like this since I was small ... I think I fulfil my role as a woman. At times I care too much"*.

Sandra sees her role as a woman teacher *"as a difficult task. Especially in black schools ... many of the black cultures expect from a woman to be inferior and the boys don't want to be taught by a white woman"*. Susan refers to the fact that *"... there are still stigmas and stereotypes that cling to women. I did my practical teaching at a black school and in their culture boys may not be taught by a female, it is not about being white ... so the moment I stand in the class then they don't care"*.

Although Nadia thinks that *"children are at times more connected to a woman, they are less scared of a female"*, she strongly indicated that *"it frustrates me if they see us as inferior"*. Esmé firmly believes that as a woman teacher her position is not the same as that of a male teacher: *"You have to strengthen yourself against these types of things, 'you are a woman, you don't know how' ... you have to put in more effort to get equality ... to get rid of those stereotypical beliefs"*. Christa, on the other hand, feels that being a woman has no bearing on how she perceives herself as a teacher; however, she acknowledges that *"perhaps men teachers are being privileged and I have not noticed it because I was not that long at schools during practical teaching"*.

#### *Agency*

Although the data show that the participants see themselves as agents of change, in terms of activism, they seem to shift the responsibility to bring about social change to the school and subjects like Life Orientation.

In line with Susan's belief that *"as a teacher I have to push away my own pre-conceived ideas"*, she accepts the challenge to take part in anti-oppressive education: *"... teachers also play a role in oppressions and because so much oppression takes place in schools ... it is so*



important that we from our side and also among our learners to eliminate it ... you know to change that whole mindset of learners". She thinks that she will be able to identify oppression to a certain extent: "I don't think it is so easy, perhaps in the corridors, there are certain things that will enable you to identify it and to address it". She is, however, concerned that "they expect us to do all these things in the class, but once you have done that, there is little time left for teaching and academic matters". She considers a subject like Life Orientation as "the perfect subject to address these issues, but also by making a period available where these type of things can be discussed".

For Willemien, who believes she has been called to the teaching profession to make a difference, anti-oppressive education is not an option, as "oppression is a reality". She acknowledges that it is easy to stereotype or to oppress: "I think you can easily be racially insensitive, you must be sensitive, also in terms of gender". However, she is willing to try to identify forms of oppression in her classroom and would like to create the opportunity where "learners must realise that oppression is a reality ... perhaps it is sugar-coated, but it is still there and if you don't empower yourself and if you are not aware of it you will allow yourself to be oppressed ... teachers have that responsibility". Although she regards Life Orientation as an important subject, she feels teaching about oppression should be included in all other subjects, but in a subtle way. "I don't think we must overdo it, they must not make the same mistake as like with Aids and sex education, because ... when the learners hear the word Aids, they close their ears and switch off ... you must practise what you preach and not talk about it all the time... I think they must make it more applicable and not only focus on it".

Although Esmé thinks that as a teacher she will be in a position to bring about change, she does not "think it is something that will happen overnight ... it is something you have to work [towards] on a daily basis. I believe and hope I will be able to do it". Agency for Esmé lies in saying "to yourself that whatever I do, I must do it in an anti-oppressive way. Sometimes one has a moment where you can oppress without realising it. It is something that you constantly have to work on". Teaching to address oppression is "one of those things that one has to slip in through the back door at times so that it is not so obvious ... at times it is just that conversation, that life lesson you give to learners that sticks, when you do not focus on the work that you actually have to focus on".

Rita not only sees herself in a position to "instil the principle of equality" in her classroom, but she relates this position to "consistent and equal treatment of all, but with discretion for their unique circumstances and unique personalities". For her, anti-oppressive education "must be the starting point of each teacher. You must not exclude, you must not have favourites in the class ... we must prepare our children from that perspective for the future ... I think it is a good vantage point to work from". She feels that Life Orientation is a subject where information about oppression can be transmitted; in fact, she feels it must be limited to Life Orientation. However, "you must not force your opinion onto the learners ... you must give them information and ask them to choose for themselves".

Nadia, who "definitely" sees herself as a change agent, regards her task to break the cycle of oppression as an "integrated multi-dimensional process ... it is a process, a give and take". She places the emphasis on communication, to talk to one another and to listen to one another: "We all know about Apartheid, and we are sick of it, but until we got to do with multi-cultural education and gender education we didn't realise how deep-rooted these things are ... you didn't realise what you can do". Although she thinks "to undermine oppression is one of our biggest challenges ... it is your class against society at large", and information about oppression should be "half the context in which you teach", she does not see that every reading

has to deal with prejudice. Rather, *“what is most important is that we have children that leave the school who are literate ... it doesn't help we try to let oppression vanish and we have a generation who cannot read or write ... there must be a balance ... yes, you have to focus on it [anti-oppressive education], teachers do play a role but it must not be your main aim”*.

Anna, who relates her role as change agent to her willingness to change her way of teaching, not only finds anti-oppressive teaching very difficult, but also feels that the school curriculum *“privileges the previously disadvantaged”*. Although she will try to identify forms of oppression in her classroom by *“looking at how learners interact with one another”*, she is more concerned with academic work. The latter relates to her perception of her role as a teacher, i.e. to provide guidance in terms of subject knowledge. Whilst she does believe teachers must help to break the cycle of oppression, she feels attention must rather be paid to academic work.

### *Support for activism*

Without exception, the participants felt their training was too theoretical and not practical enough. However, apart from Sandra, who linked school challenges and her training to the handling of oppression, the other participants were mainly concerned with issues of discipline, school violence, misbehaviour and learners that do not want to learn.

Susan views school violence as one of the major challenges, although she also mentions concerns regarding sexual harassment, children that fail, those who do drugs and girls getting pregnant. In terms of her training preparing her to take up the challenges, she feels that as she is now *“at the end of my training, I feel there are some things they could have addressed ... we had all these subjects where they taught us how to assess, how to prepare lesson plans ... but nothing tells me what do I do when I stand in front of a class when a child pulls out a knife”*. She regards her training as being more theoretical by nature and comments that *“theoretically they [the modules] looked very good but it is impossible to apply it in the classroom”*. In a similar way, Christa also indicates that her training focused more on theoretical work than on practical issues. In line with her concerns involving challenges such as behavioural problems, problems with discipline and other academic challenges, she indicates that *“we are not taught how to work with a learner who doesn't want to work ... they only teach us how to do group work, problem-solving skills etc., but not how to get learners to work”*. Rita, who is primarily concerned with problems of discipline, almost appeared desperate when she referred to her perception that there is nothing concrete in her training: *“They taught us a lot and we saw a lot during practical teaching ... I would like to see them focus more on these types of things”*. Anna, who is equally concerned with problems of discipline, indicated that *“they gave us the rules and not the ‘how’”*.

Although Nadia listed various challenges of academic nature, she referred to *“subjects like cultural education, multicultural education, gender education, stereotypes ... those subjects were good because they were about things that you haven't thought about earlier, things that you were not aware of now came to the fore ... you are more sensitive”*. For Sandra, however, racism is one of the biggest challenges to be addressed by the school: *“I think it is a big challenge to get learners to work together ... they are in a mixed class but still the blacks sit here and the white children and the Chinese and Asian children sit in a specific place ... you can also see it during break time ...”* She feels that a module on Afrocentrism and Eurocentrism *“helped me to link the two with one another, not to be Afrocentric or Eurocentric, but to work with the positive points of both”*.

### Social justice education and anti-oppressive education

From the onset we worked with the assumption that our participants are familiar with the concept *social justice*. Considering the national call for teachers to be socially just teachers, we assumed that the education of pre-service teachers will include educating them to teach for social justice. However, the participants had little knowledge of the concept and vaguely connected it with issues of equality.

Susan indicates that *“we learnt about it in one of our subjects ... I feel it has to do with the fact that everybody on social level, in their communities, must be handled in an equal manner”*. In a similar manner Esmé refers to social justice as something that *“means that all people, irrespective of their gender, race and all of those, are equal, treated equally”*. While Christa vaguely recalls it but does not think it was that addressed much during her training, Sandra is also not *“really familiar”* with the concept. She thinks it has to do with the fact that *“everybody must be equal in a social context”*, but it was not something that was really addressed during her training: *“We only addressed it lightly here and there in a subject.”* Anna is also not familiar with social justice, but she thinks it has to do with *“boys and girls that must be equal”*. In a similar vein, Willemien thinks she encountered it in some subjects and *“it is just about equality ... all races and gender”*. Rita also knows about social justice, but is not really familiar with the concept as *“it was not introduced in depth”*. She recalls a module dealing with democracy and that social justice *“means everybody must get equal opportunities”*. Of all the participants, Nadia was the only one able to relate social justice to *“many of the subjects that were really worth it ... transformation, democracy ... in those subjects you were taught what is expected from you to be a responsible citizen and this is what you have to develop in children”*.

### Discussion and implications

It seems that all eight participants are oblivious to how they experience white privilege and the currency this carries within South Africa. Solomon, Portelli, Daniel and Campbell (2007), and Tatum (1997) argue that those in positions of power and authority, for example, educators, construct discourses that are often academically and emotionally debilitating to the racial other. If we want our student teachers to engage in culturally relevant pedagogy, the troubling of white privilege becomes a prerequisite — a deep commitment and connection to all learners' success, including the building of relationships across cultural and racial differences, require the recognition of how white privilege operates in hampering the building of relationships across social and political differences (Hyland, 2009). We agree with hooks (1994:43) that *“whiteness be studied, understood and discussed — so that everybody learns that affirmation of multiculturalism, and an unbiased, inclusive perspective can and should be present, whether or not people of colour are present”*.

In the same way, when it pertains to gender, some participants come across as being trapped in accepting stereotypical and oppressive roles as *“nurturers”* and *“caregivers”*. If student teachers are oblivious of how the invisible power of sexism permeates their perceptions and expectations of their role as teachers, how then will they be able to recognise and problematise their own complicity to gender oppression? The implication is that teacher education must help students to engage and understand their own identity development and formation and provide the learning space to work with the range of emotions and feelings of indignation that evolve from an exposure to internalised oppression. Our study reaffirms the critical need for a systemic approach to how social identity is unpacked through curriculum, pedagogy and social relations in teacher education.

Chabuck and Zembylas (2008) raise the question of who is to be an agent of activism for social justice. They argue that socially just teachers will be activists in their classrooms, providing teaching, equitable policies, and critical exposure to justice-related issues. Furthermore, they are also called to activism outside the school context (Chabuck & Zembylas, 2008). All the participants perceived themselves as agents of change and their perception seems to coincide with an understanding that the school is responsible for bringing about social change. There is a tension, however, in how the participants perceive themselves and how they see themselves acting as agents of change in the area of teaching for social justice. In other words, their actions and activism do not feed into their perception of themselves as bringing about social change. In instances where they do see themselves as agents of change, in terms of activism they defer such responsibility to the school and to subject areas like Life Orientation. Perhaps Moore's (2007) argument is broadly accurate that pre-service teachers do not see themselves as teachers or in sufficient positions of power and authority to effect change as pre-service teachers.

What then, can be learned from our participant's experiences that should be considered as we think about teacher education? We would argue that that the participants' low commitment to action or activism and their low knowledge about social justice may explain the tension between how our participants see themselves and act as agents for social change. Teacher educators need to examine more critically how our teacher educator programmes create confidence. Such critical teacher educators can also consider encouraging students to see themselves as agents of change and as future educators who will bring about social change.

Finally, if national policy requires that all educators are *socially just educators*, the problem for teacher education of 'unexamined areas of the self' is general, and not limited to those who teach about oppression (Francis & Hemson, 2007). Programmes focusing on teaching such issues have to become more visible, and such visibility mandates compulsion. This will mean addressing education for social justice among pre-service teachers as deeply inscribed habits of feeling and thinking shaped by broad, discursive habits (Petrovic & Rosiek, 2003). All students need to be exposed to critical multiculturalism, anti-oppressive education or education for social justice, as oppression affects everybody. Understanding the interconnections that exist between race, gender and other forms of identification may prove worthwhile as such understanding shifts quite powerfully away from essentialising identities to an approach that views all forms of oppression as important. It is our contention that an understanding of the interconnection between various social identities can be useful in designing more holistic modules that will teach about anti-oppression and will teach for social justice.

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